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## Gladys Berejiklian's monumental backflip on Powerhouse Museum



The Powerhouse Museum building in Sydney's Ultimo.

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### • YONI BASHAN

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NSW POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

@yoni\_bashan

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NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has dumped plans to move Sydney's Powerhouse Museum to the city's western suburbs, in a billion-dollar backflip on a key election promise as she scrambles to quell a backbench revolt following Don Harwin's resurrection as arts minister.

Despite years of defending the project as worthy of public spending, Ms Berejiklian will announce on Saturday that the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences will remain at its current site in inner-city Ultimo while a new "state of the art" facility will be planned for western Sydney.

The move was quickly interpreted by Coalition MPs as a significant capitulation to the NSW Labor opposition and crossbench parties, both of which have consistently attacked the \$1.6bn relocation as a waste of money since it was mooted by the Baird government in 2014.



Six years after the plan was announced, construction has remained stalled and no jobs have been created.

The relocation of the Powerhouse Museum was originally signed off by former NSW premier Mike Baird as an election commitment in 2015, and was a response to a business case put forward by museum officials requesting more funding to expand exhibition opportunities.

The divisive project raised ire not long after it was floated by Mr Baird, with almost 200 Australians — including actress Cate Blanchett and her playwright husband Andrew Upton, former NSW premier Bob Carr and Hungry Jack’s chairman Jack Cowin — writing an open letter to the state government urging it to reconsider the move.

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Taking out a full-page ad in The Sydney Morning Herald in 2016, the group labelled itself the Powerhouse Museum Alliance and asked Mr Baird “please don’t destroy the Powerhouse”.

The letter attracted a quick rebuke from other influential Sydneysiders — such as Aussie Home Loans founder John Symond, Harvey Norman chairman Gerry Harvey and Sydney Cricket Ground and Sports Grounds Trust chairman Tony Shepherd — arguing that it was “classist” and that residents in the city’s west deserved better access to arts galleries and museums.

The Powerhouse’s operators had said its location at Ultimo was outdated and “designed for 19th- and 20th-century collections”, constraining its capacity to “move with the times”. The board itself went through a period of renewal last year, with former Carriageworks director Lisa Havilah and Create NSW strategist Alex Bowen brought in to steer the site.

Senior members of Ms Berejiklian’s cabinet have been strident in their criticism. They have branded the project as wasteful and argued the funding would be better spent on infrastructure projects in regions that have suffered from drought and bushfires.

Local interest groups in the Parramatta area have also protested against the fact that its construction would have led to the demolition of two heritage-listed properties, Willow Grove and St George’s Terrace.

The construction union joined the chorus of voices against the project this week, saying it would order contractors not to destroy the historic premises.

The building's design — it was to be raised on a “hyper-platform”, with a latticework design — has not escaped opprobrium either. It has been ridiculed and was described by the state opposition as a “monstrosity on stilts”.

In an embargoed press release given to journalists late on Friday, Ms Berejiklian and her Treasurer, Dominic Perrottet, said their decision to abandon the relocation, which would have cost several hundred jobs, would instead save jobs and create new employment through construction. No explanation was provided for their change of heart.

“Sydney is a global city of more than five million people and this will allow us to provide an outstanding visitor experience in the areas of technology, science, engineering and design at two major locations,” Ms Berejiklian said.

Some Liberal MPs told *The Weekend Australian* the move was signed off to ensure the harmonious return of former arts minister Don Harwin to the ministry. Mr Harwin, a strong proponent of the Powerhouse relocation, was cleared on Friday of a penalty infringement notice that had him temporarily step aside from the cabinet.

“This is the price for getting Don back,” said one MP. “She knows bringing him back is unpopular. Getting rid of the Powerhouse makes it easier and will improve relationships with the crossbench.”

The Australian reported earlier this month that Shooters, Fishers and Farmers MPs had listed the dumping of the Powerhouse Museum relocation as a key demand for their co-operation in the NSW Legislative Council.

About \$46m was earmarked to be spent by consultants in order to plan the relocation, NSW parliament has been told. As recently as late May, the Premier defended the relocation during a press conference announcing that a planned redevelopment of ANZ Stadium would no longer proceed.

The NSW seat of Parramatta is held by Skills Minister Geoff Lee on a margin of 10.6 per cent. Some Liberal MPs welcomed the government's decision, but said it should have cancelled the project entirely. A cabinet minister told *The Weekend Australian* the announcement was likely made late on Friday in a clumsy bid to bury news behind coverage of the Eden-Monaro by-election.

“Even this is out of step with community expectations — it's an unnecessary waste of money designed to prop up a marginal seat,” a Liberal MP said. “We're finally doing what we should have done to begin with.”

Mr Perrottet is understood to have despised the project, as did Deputy Premier John Barilaro, although both have repeatedly defended it in statements to the public and to parliament.

The Treasurer said the existing museum at Ultimo would complement the “new future-focused Parramatta facility”.

“This is about recognising the passion and hard work that has created the Powerhouse and ensuring the vision for a bigger brighter future is realised,” his prepared remarks stated.